

GERÐUR KRISTNÝ
Poems and an extract from a novel

NEW YEAR'S MORNING

The only ones to have
survived the night
are a Japanese family
who have switched off
the neon signs in their heads
and made do with the light
over the mountains

When the boy breaks the ice-film
on the lake with his toe
a low crack sounds
like the snap of a wing

He catches up with his parents
on the bridge where they
quicken their pace
They mean to be safe
indoors before
darkness reimposes
its curfew

PATRIOTIC POEM

The cold makes me
a lair from fear
places a pillow of
downy drift
under my head
a blanket of snow
to swaddle me in

I'd lay my ear to
the cracking of the ice
in the hope of hearing it
retreat
if I didn't know
I'd be frozen fast

The ice lets no one go

My country
a spread deathbed
my initials stitched
on the icy linen

NORTH

Slow as sperm whales
we glide through the gloom
which is white
here on the heath

It holds fast to its own
conceding only
one post at a time

For an instant they flash
on the side of the road
like the little girl's matches
in the fairytale
lighting us
until we return
to the hole in the ice
to breathe

NIGHT

As you fall asleep
your arms slide apart
no shelter there for me now
the hatches burst
and the sea breaks through

I sink
through a thousand fathoms
not one of which
enfathoms me

Slowly the seabed
subsides
beneath the weight of my sleep

Forboding heads my way
soon it will glide
into my dream

like a visitation

DEPARTURE

At the end
of the ramp
I inadvertently glance back

but you have vanished from view

Beyond the glass
a new day lifts itself
off the pavement
the blue of the mountains
spreads across my mind

as I turn
to continue on my way
I trip on my hem
my journey's designed
for a bigger woman than me

The plane waits on the runway
and I feel as if
the propeller's bitter blades
have entered my heart

TROY

Battlements rise against
the blind sky
The gods have turned
their backs on me
they incite against me
a mighty army
a frenzied throng
of darkness

Skin stretched over
the heel's hot blood

I whet my weapon
on the bones of my foes
then hack off the heel

Draw my knife as the sun sets
sleep now, I'll hew you a horse

ANNE FRANK

By day there's not a peep
from Anne who lives
in widowhood overhead
– except when she dozes off
over her diary
drops it on the floor

Otherwise not a peep

It's another matter at night
then there's all hell of a hubbub
Anne's friends pound up the stairs
hollering their hellos
and crack open a feast
Some with a bottle of buttermilk
others nursing eggs

Towards dawn the neighbours are fed up
of fiddles and folksongs
The guests depart in haste
melting into the walls

When the police force the door
Anne sits at the kitchen table
writing

Extract from the novel [A Boat with Sail and All]

Chapter One

The bakery had mixed up the order, so in the middle of the coffee table sat a chocolate cake bearing the iced inscription: ARON SNÆR 6 TODAY. The gaudy letters promised toffees by the kilo, huge gifts and grandmother's footsteps. Although it didn't quite fit the bill, Mum had taken the cake anyway. My dad was called Gunnar Pálsson and had reached the age of 68. It wasn't his birthday, it was his funeral. He had been boxed up in a dark hole with dirt shovelled on top.

Mum coped like the heroine she had been described as in the obituaries. You'd have been forgiven for thinking some of them were about her, so fulsome were the descriptions of dear Magdalena who stood like a rock at her husband's side during his illness. There was no mention of the violent fits of sobbing or torpor of numb indifference which was more often than not the effect of the drugs her doctor was so kind as to slip her. Sometimes she had the same dull expression I remembered from when I was a teenager. Then I looked away. Mum was wearing a new, dark-blue dress, and I had chosen a vermilion lipstick to match it. She held her head high; she had got a friend to help her put a dark-brown rinse in her hair, and she was bustling around the apartment. Both living and dining room were full of people. Dad's friends and work colleagues and Mum's relatives had come to pay us their respects. No one from the East. I made a circuit of the house to be sure, squeezing apologetically between the guests, some of whom smiled kindly at me and praised the coffee as if I had been responsible for the plantation it came from. Maybe the people were dead. I don't know why I expected to see them. My father's family hadn't exactly cluttered up the house. To tell the truth, I'd never met any of them. But I'd always assumed they would attend Dad's funeral, perhaps seven or eight of them, sipping their coffee, soberly dressed and grave of face, talking among themselves of people and places the rest of us didn't know.

My sister Gubba and I tried to do our bit by keeping the coffee flowing. Her white shirt had quickly become spattered all over with coffee stains and she had changed into a horror of Mum's, at least 20 years old, a green satin blouse with a ridiculous bit on the front that dangled to and fro. No doubt she herself thought it was OK. She's never known how to dress. Unless grief had undermined her sense of taste. Gubba had hardly stopped snivelling since the vicar called Dad "the man with the heart of gold". I pictured how the massive golden heart must have weighed Dad down, sinking ever closer to his stomach tumour. I'd managed to keep my composure, but I had a paper handkerchief in my sleeve, just in case. All day, I'd found myself feeling Dad was still here. When I was in the kitchen I thought I heard him in the living room, and when I was there I thought I heard his voice from the dining room. A few of his old school friends stood there, clustered together, and I had the strong impression that if they separated I would surely see Dad in the chair under the horse painting by Jóhann Briem, where he always sat to read the papers. When I entered the dining room a little later, some woman was sitting there, picking at her teeth with her fingernails.

Gunnar Birnir, Gubba's son, soon to be 8, was in his room, and didn't answer when I knocked on his door. When I opened the door he was lying on the bed in his best clothes with his headphones plugged into Gubba's old record-player. He took them off when he noticed me.

"Abba. The Winner Takes It All," he said, as if I'd asked. I bent down by the bed and stroked his hair. He'd been crying.

"Don't you want some cake, love?"

"No," said Gunnar Birnir and jerked his head away. I withdrew my hand, and kissed him on the forehead before leaving the room.

He had kept himself to himself since Dad died. Dad had totally changed when Gunnar Birnir was born. It was extraordinary. All of a sudden he saw reason to come home from work in the middle of the day to be with the boy, something that would have been completely unthinkable when Gubba and I were small.

A momentary silence fell on the guests whenever Gubba popped into the room, red-eyed in the green horror, to serve them more coffee. The women unconsciously tilted their heads as she filled their cups and whispered: "Thank you, dear, you're doing wonderfully." The men muttered something too, but indistinctly. Eiríkur Eyjólfsson, who had run the legal practice jointly with Dad until he fell ill, finally spoke up: "Are your studies going well, dear?"

"Oh, yes, they're going fine," mumbled Gubba.

"And you've got a year to go?"

My sister nodded.

"Just as long as she continues with her studies," said Mum, brushing a cake crumb from the corner of her mouth. For some reason the wedding band on her skinny ring finger seemed more noticeable than before.

For a moment I thought she was getting at me, for never having completed my BA dissertation. I was about to answer, took a deep breath and was composing a retort in my mind, something about it not making any difference to my pay packet, when I realised I shouldn't. Abandoned cake dishes lay on an occasional table. I took them into the kitchen, before I could make a fool of myself. But I did see Eiríkur nodding politely at Mum's reply. Both his sons, once Mohican-crested dropouts, were now lawyers and ran a law firm together on Suðurlandsbraut. They hadn't put a foot wrong since they gave up the glue-sniffing at 15.

Dark-suited elderly men and composed women politely sipped their coffee and nibbled slices of the Smarties-decorated cake. To begin with the conversation had been about what a special man Dad had been and how well he had coped with his illness, but then the discussion turned to politics, pay negotiations and other things that the grey-haired brigade like to discuss when they get together.

Their wives chatted about the hint of cinnamon in the coffee, whispered words of comfort to Mum, and offered now and then to help Gubba and me in the kitchen. I declined the offer. Their pastel suits didn't exactly imply that they had attended in order to get roped into the washing up or coffee-making. Dad had done them the favour of dying in spring, so they could turn up to the funeral in pale-yellow and pink suits. Black doesn't suit older people. It emphasises their wrinkles.

We were all relieved when the guests finally showed signs of leaving. Gubba handed the men their coats and the women their furs. A whole mink farm disappeared out into the cold spring night. Eiríkur left last. I held out his coat for him. It was only then that I noticed how he had aged. He tried to put the hand in which he was holding his hat into the sleeve and it seemed to

take him a moment or two to work out what the problem was. Finally he took the hat in his other hand but then tried to push that one into the sleeve.

“Oh, when did things suddenly get so complicated?” he said in a low voice, smiling in embarrassment.

“There, it’s all right,” I said, taking his hat and laying it on a chair while he put on the thick, black coat. The moment it was on he became the person I knew again, a dignified, elderly man.

Eiríkur turned, frowned and said: “Oddfríður, dear, your father was a good man,” just as if someone had been claiming otherwise.

I was about to say something, but suddenly I couldn’t speak a word. It was as if he saw how I felt, because before I knew it he had seized me in his arms and crushed me against him. There was obviously still strength in the old dog. I could hardly breathe. A faint scent of fabric conditioner and pungent, old-fashioned aftershave filled my senses. It occurred to me what a difficult day it must have been for him. He and Dad had worked side by side for nearly 40 years. They had met or talked on the phone almost every single day. Eiríkur had known my Dad far better and longer than I had.

“If you need anything, dear, you can always come to me,” Eiríkur whispered.

When he let me go at last I saw a tear glint in the corner of his eye. I was choked up. It’s horrible seeing old people cry. Somehow you expect that all the years they’ve put behind them ought to have toughened them up.

In the kitchen Gubba had already begun washing up. The evening light entered through the kitchen window, the blouse casting a pale green hue on her face. “Why did they never get a dishwasher?” she grumbled when I appeared.

I picked up a dishcloth and began to dry. It was years since we had washed up together and I’d forgotten how heavy-handed my sister was. But I soon remembered when the water began to splash over my best clothes. I had to wait my chance to reach out for the wet plates on the draining board so as not to get a tidal wave sloshed over me or take a direct hit from the washing-up brush. The silence was rather oppressive. I was relieved when Mum came and started putting the dishes away.

“There’s a very unhappy little boy out there somewhere,” she said absent-mindedly, holding a saucer from the Danish coffee service that she and Dad had been given as a wedding present. “Poor little Aron Snær.”

Translated from the Icelandic by Victoria Cribb and Anna Yates
